House Proposal

Black Student Heard and the Black Student Union

1. Introduction

Middlebury College is renowned for its commitment to fostering diversity within its campus community. One of their four fluencies is understanding cultural differences. As Middlebury strives to create an inclusive environment, it is crucial to recognize the nuanced experiences of underrepresented students on campus. The demographic composition of Middlebury College primarily consists of white students, comprising 56.4% of the student body as of 2022. This demographic reality is particularly pronounced on a smaller campus like Middlebury's, highlighting the significance and urgency of a specialized area where Black students can find solace and connection without the pervasive influence of the white gaze. Despite the presence of BIPOC affinity spaces like the Anderson Freeman Center and PALANA, it is crucial to understand that the spaces designated for People of Color (POC) are not solely intended for Black students. While the spaces provide a space away from the overwhelmingly white population, it fails to address that out of 814 students of color, only 137 of them are Black (2021). In an environment where the Black populations are a minority, their needs, even in these affinity spaces, can quickly get overshadowed.

It is in this context that we propose the reclamation and repurposing of Coltrane Lounge to serve as a dedicated space for Black students. Historically belonging to the Black Student Union, Coltrane Lounge holds significance as a site where Black students have found community and empowerment. Additionally, we advocate for the restoration of the upper rooms in Adirondack House to serve as offices for professors within the growing Black Studies Program at Middlebury.

2. Background Information

Coltrane Lounge, originally established as the Black Cultural Center, holds a significant place in Middlebury College's history of fostering inclusivity and empowerment among Black students. In 1973, during Mildred Reese's presidency, the space was graciously bestowed upon the Black Student Union (BSU), then known as the Black Students for Mutual Understanding (BSMU). Renamed Coltrane Lounge in honor of the legendary jazz artist John Coltrane, the space symbolized a beacon of inspiration for Black students to chart their own paths, moving towards progress and self-determination, as articulated by Coltrane's mantra: "move to revolution and not by revolution."

Furthermore, the Adirondack House played a pivotal role in supporting Black student life on campus. In 1983, it housed essential facilities for the Black community, including a BSU Library, Study Room, BSU office, and a dedicated space for Black art. These provisions within the Adirondack House not only served practical needs but also served as focal points for fostering community, academic excellence, and cultural expression among Black students at Middlebury College.

Large efforts have been made to bring back a Black space to the Middlebury community but have been ignored by the administration. Despite the intention of creating spaces like Anderson Freeman Center and PALANA for People of Color (POC) to foster unity and support, a space for POCs does not ensure the elimination of anti-blackness. Despite the diversity represented within POC spaces, Black individuals can find themselves marginalized or excluded due to deep-seated prejudices and stereotypes surrounding Black populations. Systemic biases

may lead to the prioritization of non-Black voices and experiences, further perpetuating the marginalization of Black individuals within POC spaces. Therefore, while these spaces aim to provide solace and solidarity for all marginalized groups, it is essential to acknowledge and actively combat the systemic anti-Black attitudes and behaviors that continue to undermine the inclusivity and effectiveness of POC spaces.

3. **Rationale**
    A) **Historical Significance:** Coltrane Lounge and the upper floor of the Adirondack House hold profound historical significance for Black students at Middlebury College. Alumni, deeply rooted in the legacy of these spaces, have expressed disappointment in the college's decision to strip them away. The removal of these spaces represents a regression in the college's commitment to honoring and preserving the rich history and contributions of its Black student population.
    B) **A Growing Program**: Black Studies at Middlebury is an emerging and increasingly popular field, with the number of majors and minors growing each year. Many students, Black and non-Black, find solace in these classes amidst the predominantly white campus environment. Therefore, it's essential to not only expand the program with new hires but also accommodate this growth while also providing a dedicated space where all students can engage with Black Studies as an academic discipline, regardless of whether they are enrolled in classes.
    C) **Addressing Anti-Blackness**: Despite the existence of BIPOC spaces, pervasive anti-Blackness persists throughout the Middlebury College community. Black students not only deserve a dedicated space away from the larger campus community but also a safe haven where they can gather in solidarity and support. Reclaiming Coltrane Lounge and restoring the upper floors of the Adirondack House would provide Black students with a sanctuary where they can celebrate their identity, cultivate community, and navigate the challenges of being Black on a predominantly white campus.
    D) **Community Gathering Challenges**: Current room restrictions hinder Black students from fully utilizing the space for social events. The inability to host events before or after certain hours due to noise complaints restricts the potential for meaningful social interactions and community-building activities. It's crucial to acknowledge the harmful and triggering effects of having Public Safety called on Black students due to noise. However, if the upper floors were reinstated with daytime facilities such as a library, offices, and the art room, these spaces would be inactive after hours, alleviating noise concerns and allowing Black students to host events without fear of disturbing residents and having public safety called on them. Creating an environment where Black students can gather without fear of unwarranted scrutiny or intervention is essential for fostering a supportive and inclusive community.

4. **Proposal**
    - Establish the Adirondack Building as a space for the Black Studies Program

    - Four offices on the second floor for the director and three professors in the program
    - Renovate the lounge space on the second floor to be a conference room with a capacity of a minimum of 8 people.
    - Accommodate for other spatial needs; mail and print room, storage, etc.
- Reclaim Coltrane as a Space for the Black Student Union as a Student Organization listed under the Black Studies Program
    - The Black Student Union has priority to the space and all booking of the space goes through a two-factor request process seeking approval from 1) Event Management and 2) the Black Student Union.[1]
    - Black Studies Professors can use this space for lectures, as well as events and guest speakers.
    - Specific renovations include fixing windows and the backdoor for improved functionality, along with an improved speaker system.
- Allocation of one room as a library for the Black Studies Program to enhance academic resources.
- Provision of the remaining rooms as affinity housing for Black students
    - Open to everyone, but working to nurture a space where Black students will be respected and accommodated.
    - Provide accessible access to the second floor for students with ADA requirements.

5. Conclusion

In concluding thought, the proposal to reclaim and repurpose spaces for Black students at Middlebury College embodies a profound commitment to fostering inclusivity, empowerment, and academic excellence within the campus community. By restoring Coltrane Lounge and the upper floors of the Adirondack House to their historical significance, Middlebury reaffirms its dedication to honoring the rich legacy of Black student experiences. Comparable institutions often gratified for their diversity, much like Middlebury, offer Black students various affinity spaces[2]. Providing designated spaces for the Black Student Union, Black Studies Program, and affinity housing not only addresses the pressing need for tailored support and representation but also symbolizes a tangible step towards dismantling systemic barriers and fostering a more equitable campus environment. By reclaiming these spaces and reestablishing their intended purposes, Middlebury can take tangible steps towards addressing the needs of its Black students and faculty. This proposal not only honors the college's commitment to diversity but also reinforces its dedication to creating an inclusive campus environment where all members feel seen, heard, and valued.

[1] Similar to the system of the PALANA house, student organizations would need to complete a request form directed to the Black Student Union as well as the Event Management form.
[2] Williams College has the Eban House, a space for Black students on campus. Tufts University has the Africana Center.